

On *Esu* and *Aje*: An Exercise in Conceptual Decolonization

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Abstract

The principal preoccupation of this study is to question the implications of some Hellenistic concepts upon traditional African concepts. In other words, this research furthers previous explorations on the discourse on conceptual decolonization of African thought systems. Specifically, there has been the uncritical assumption that *Esu* translates literally as the Devil/Satan in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic religious traditions as practiced among the contemporary *Yoruba*. This seems to be the case owing to the parallels in character between Devil/Satan within these traditions and *Esu* in traditional *Yoruba* religion. However, it needs to be stressed that there persist some conscious scholarly efforts to correcting this misrepresented and uncharitable locus. As a result, there is a consciousness, albeit vegetative but nevertheless an improvement compared to the initial uncritical status quo that *Esu* does not translate equivocally as Satan/Devil in *Yoruba* theology. This 'victory' implies that there are other concepts in need of decolonization but vitiated perhaps owing to the influence wielded by Christianity and Islam over contemporary *Yoruba* custom. Hence, this research intends to explore the notion of *Aje* which does not translate necessarily into English as 'witches' and then pass necessarily as a feminine affair. Using the methods of critical analysis and interpretation, this research adduces that *Aje* is not necessarily evil or malicious and feminine but is a force with benevolent characterizations, like *Esu* if propitiated properly.

Keywords: African Religiosity, *Aje*, Conceptual Decolonization, *Esu*, Yoruba Philosophy.

Introduction

It has gradually become the norm to employ Western semantics for African concepts. This is the case which the present study seems to mitigate, by paying closer attention to the discourse on conceptual decolonization. The Western idea of a witch necessarily being a woman and a Devil necessarily malicious

and oppositional to God, seems to have been imported into the African place with confusion and uncharitable misrepresentation of the original African semantic to such concepts. Hence, the aim of this essay is to articulate the urgency in the decolonization of the concept - 'Aje.' This is pertinent because in the business of assessing ideas original to the African place, it is crucial to divest them of every layer of Hellenistic and Western undergirding. Granted the call for conceptual decolonization has been applied to several African terms with tangible results, it is the case that 'aje' is in need of this decolonization exercise. This is pertinent when compared with another more technical term in traditional Yoruba religiosity and spirituality - *Esu*. The implication from the exercise on conceptual decolonization of *Esu*, suggests that its English and Judeo-Christian and Islamic renditions as Satan/Devil fails.¹ It is on this note that we explore the notion of *Aje*, to articulate that it also needs to be given similar decolonization and articulation to eradicate unwarrantable and misleading interpretations.

Through the methods of critical analysis and interpretation, this study will attain the foregoing research aim in four sections, the first being this introduction. In the second part, a brief attention is paid to the discourse on conceptual decolonization, its meaning and application to some domain of thoughts within the African philosophic place. Specifically, how this has been assisted with the better conception of *Esu* is considered. The third section considers the idea of 'Aje' from its assumed interpretation before decolonizing it. It also includes a critical

1 Danoye Laguda. "Èsòù, Determinism and Evil in Yoruba Religion." In T. Falola (Ed.). *Èsòù: Yoruba God, Power and Imaginative Frontiers*. Pp. 91-100 (North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press 2013); Olubayo Adekola. "Èsòù Elegbara in Yoruba Spiritual and Religious Discourse." In T. Falola (Ed.). *Èsòù: Yoruba God, Power and Imaginative Frontiers*. Pp. 57-76 (North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press 2013); Emmanuel Ofuasia & Babajide Dasaolu. "Ludwig Wittgenstein's Critique of Metaphysics: Implications and Relevance for African Philosophy." *Africology: Journal of Pan African Studies*. Vol. 10. No. 7 (2017): 68-87; Kazeem Fayemi. "Ire and Ibi: Èsòù and the Philosophical Problem of Evil." In T. Falola (Ed.). *Èsòù: Yoruba God, Power and Imaginative Frontiers*. Pp. 117-129 (North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press 2013); Emmanuel Ofuasia. *Alfred N. Whitehead and the Relation between Religion and Science*. (Saarbrücken: LAP Publishers 2015).

assessment and the call for contemporary African scholars to seek ways to provide tangible and rational explanations for events that are quick to graduate into unquestionable myths. The fourth section concludes this exercise.

On Conceptual Decolonization

Conceptual decolonization arose as a result of the uncharitable misrepresentation of African ideas through the languages that were non-African. The term was first used within the philosophic parlance by the Ghanaian philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu, who invites African intellectuals to take a critical look at the concept that they use whilst addressing discourses on subjects pertaining to Africa.² He sees as an impediment, to the 'entrapped' African philosophers, the language of the West. He reveals that most African scholars are institutionally soaked in Western modes of philosophical thinking.³ Wiredu informs that the remote and immediate consequences of the steeping of African scholars in Western modes of philosophic tinkering is the experience of a delay in self-understanding and realization, since African scholars are consigned to grappling with concepts and discourses in a mode of philosophizing that is not primarily theirs.⁴

Wiredu, is however, not the only one who comes up with the foregoing laudable observation. Other scholars such as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o⁵ and Wole Soyinka⁶ also do. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o who is well aware of the problems that beset African intellectual authenticity and heritage, goes to the extreme of demanding that African writers should write in their indigenous languages. In other words, he demands African writers to begin writing literatures in their own languages, and

2 Kwasi Wiredu. "Post-Colonial African Philosophy." In: O. Oladipo (ed.) *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy: Four Essays*. (Ibadan: Hope Publications 1995), pg. 1.

3 Babajide Dasaolu & Emmanuel Ofuasia. "Ludwig Wittgenstein's Critique of Metaphysics: Implications and Relevance for African Philosophy." pg. 81.

4 Babajide Dasaolu & Emmanuel Ofuasia. "Ludwig Wittgenstein's Critique of Metaphysics: Implications and Relevance for African Philosophy." pg. 81.

5 Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. (New York: Heinmann 1986), pg. 23.

to make these literatures connected to their people's revolutionary struggles for liberation from their neo-colonial contexts. The role of language and its bewitchment, from Ngugi's perspective is very pertinent. Ngugi is one of the very few African writers who is aware of the limits and extents, how a foreign language renders almost obsolete African indigenous concepts or even world-views.⁷

Wole Soyinka, on his own part, attempts to decolonize the African world-view away from the mythical character that has been necessarily adduced to it as he hints at symbolism. For him, symbolic representations in Yoruba culture is not one that deals with planets and stars as in the Greek myths but "...the imagery of peat, chalk, oil, kernels, blood, heartwood and tuber, and active metaphors of human social preoccupations."⁸ In his reference to *Ijala*, a song that is popular among Yoruba hunters and adherents of the deity, *Ogun*, Soyinka expatiates: "*Ijala* celebrates not only the deity but animal and plant life, seeks to capture the essence and relationships of growing things and the insights of man into the secrets of the universe."⁹ One may see clearly how Soyinka makes the attempt to decolonize the Yoruba ritual archives away from the given that it is nothing but myths and esoteric affairs. Much as he does this exercise in decolonization, he does not fail to improvise and modernize as well. In one of the interviews that he granted, he explained:

...Take Shango [the Orisa of lightning, dance and justice] for instance. Shango becomes the demiurge of electricity, so that this new phenomenon does not become an object of terror, it does not alienate you, because Yoruba religion enables you to assimilate it. The ease with which the Yoruba moves into that world

6 Wole Soyinka. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990).

7 Babajide Dasaolu & Emmanuel Ofuasia. "Ludwig Wittgenstein's Critique of Metaphysics: Implications and Relevance for African Philosophy." pg. 81.

8 Wole Soyinka. *Myth, Literature and the African World*, pg. 25.

9 Wole Soyinka. *Myth, Literature and the African World*, pg. 28.

and adapts to phenomenon that had not come into the purview of his religion until recently – it means that he does not see the need to protect his family or his town from the benefits of this new technological experience.¹⁰

The necessity for decolonization finds voice both in the religion and political arenas of African living. It is for this reason that the representation of *Esu*, in Yoruba religion as Devil/Satan is totally misleading and has been ably corrected by scholars. Who then is *Esu*? Interestingly, *Esu* has titles and names to different people:

The Yoruba call him *Èsòù*, *Èd̀l̀èò̀g̀b̀àìr̀a* and *Èd̀l̀èò̀g̀b̀àl̀*, but he has many names and homes. To the Fon he is *Legba*; in African America he is *Papa Joe*; in the Caribbean he is *Papa Labas* and *Loa Legba*; in Brazil he is *Exu*. The God of duality, multiplicity, duplicity, confusion and evolution, *Èd̀l̀èò̀g̀b̀àl̀* is one of the most significant Gods, and his origin, texts, manifestations and contributions are innumerable.¹¹

Esu is primarily a special relations officer of *Oloìdù̀m̀àr̀èl̀* and a messenger of the gods.¹² *Esu* comprises the prefix ‘E’ and a verb ‘su’ (i.e. to harmonize or bring together). Hence, *Èsòù* may be seen as “one who brings peoples or issues together for harmonious existence.”¹³

It is important to admit at this juncture that with the era of colonization and Western civilization, the personality of *Esu*, out of all the Yoruba gods has suffered the most. Samuel

10 Wole Soyinka. “Wole Soyinka on Yoruba Religion: A Conversation with Ulli Beier.” *Isokan Yoruba Magazine*. Vol. 3. No. 3 (1997), Pg. 43.

11 Teresa N. Washington. “The Penis, The Pen, and the Praise: Èsòù, the Seminal Force in African American Life, Literature and Lyrics.” In T. Falola (Ed.). *Èsòù: Yoruba God, Power and Imaginative Frontiers* (North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press 2013), Pg. 315.

12 Olanrewaju Shitta-Bey. “A Critique of Maduabuchi Dukor’s “Divination: A Science or An Art?”” *Open Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 3. No. 1. (2013), Pg. 79.

13 Olubayo Adekola. “Èsòù Elegbara in Yoruba Spiritual and Religious Discourse.” In T. Falola (Ed.). *Èsòù: Yoruba God, Power and Imaginative Frontiers*.(North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press 2013), Pg. 58.

Johnson¹⁴, like Ajayi Crowther, (first translator of the Yoruba Bible from English) before him had submitted that *Esu* passes as the Biblical Satan, the Evil One, the author of all evils. Their submissions may have been inspired by the negative qualities of *Esu* as an impassionate enforcer, trickster and schemer. When one considers the personality of *Esu* thus rendered in an *Ifa* verse in *Oturupon Meji*, his appellation as “He who belongs to opposing camps without shame,” is not in doubt. The implication is that he has the capacity for good and bad agency just like any entity. Unfortunately, however, it is this negative aspect of the deity that has informed the proposals of Crowther and Johnson who inadvertently play the role of accomplices in the colonization project.

Remarkably, there have been laudable scholarly efforts at undoing the harm and misrepresentation of *Esu*, as this had been hinted in the opening pages of this inquiry. The common conclusion is that the deity was given a wrong ascription to be necessarily opposed to the will of *Olorun/Olodumare* as holds for the Biblical and *Al Quranic* Satan. Interestingly, very few efforts and attention have been given to the notion of *Aje* and it is based on this that this study seeks to engage with in its remaining pages.

“Aje Does Not Translate into Witch”: A Plea for Linguistic Excuse

It is important to commence this section with the understanding that just as the concept *Esu* was erroneously colonized and articulated as Satan, *aje* also suffers the same fate as it has been bandied to translate literally as ‘witch.’ It is for this reason that this study seeks to engage in the business of decolonizing the concept, *aje*, away from its Judeo-Christian ‘invention’ in the minds of the contemporary African.

14 Samuel Johnson. *The History of the Yorubas*. (Lagos: CMS Books 1921), pg. 28

Hence, the aim of this inquiry, in its effort toward arguing for the pertinence of decolonizing ‘*aje*,’ articulates two primary theses: (a) *Aje* does not translate into ‘witch’ and as a craft that is necessarily feminine and (b) the concept ‘witch’ is itself too amorphous that it is difficult to pin down. What then does the concept ‘*aje*’ connote? Much as this answer seems straightforward, it is a very tricky one for if care is not taken the answer may lapse into the erroneous but accentuated definition and utility of the concept. As a result, the first task is to give the ordinary and literal usage of the term and why such persists. The second task is to show the problems and confusion from such. The third task is to decolonize the concept and show what it really means for the traditional Yoruba prior to colonization and introduction of Western civilization.

In recent times, ‘*aje*’ is a term that is used to refer to women who are known to depict malevolent and evil acts. Another word for malevolent forces is ‘*ajogun*’ and these “are led by eight warlords: *Iku* (death), *Arun* (disease); *Ofo* (loss), *Egba* (paralysis), *Oran* (trouble), *Epe* (curse), *Ewon* (imprisonment), *Eye* (affliction).”¹⁵ These malevolent features are the physical manifestation and/or expressions of the activities of witches and witchcraft, according to popular belief. Reports on witchcraft activities, especially in Africa are too numerous that it has been conceived as an act that is naturally evil and malicious.

In contemporary climes, what people termed *aje* have the capacity to transform into animals such as cats and owls and wreak havoc on their intended targets. It is for this reason that E. Evans-Pritchard concludes that in Africa, “All misfortunes are due to witchcraft.”¹⁶ Such beliefs are further reinforced by Pentecostalism and conceived as “the plans of actions that evolve from demonologies.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, the idea is further

15 Oludamini Ogunnaike. *Sufism and Ifa: Ways of Knowing in Two West African Intellectual Traditions*. Online Ph.D Dissertation. (Harvard: Graduate School of Arts & Sciences Harvard University 2015), Pg. 252.

16 Edward E. Evans-Pritchard. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. (London: Clarendon 1937), Pg. 53.

17 Thomas J. Schoeneman. “The Witch-hunt as a Culture Change Phenomenon.” *Ethos*. Vol. 3 No. 4 (1975), Pg. 529.

buttressed by passing it as something that is naturally feminine, as it was in Europe where women who are usually well over fifty, an age considered to be advanced at that time¹⁸ were prime suspects. Another condition is that these women most likely "...had never given birth, [and] comprised of the female group most difficult to assimilate, to comprehend, within the regulative late medieval social matrix, organized as it was around the family unit."¹⁹

Clearly, the confusion that emanates is that the Western way of viewing the phenomenon is imported into the African (Yoruba) place as *aje* soon became the local equivalent for witches. So, wherever *aje* is mentioned, the Western *definiens* is imported into the mental set and used as prejudice to assess the individual; and Christianity has done no help. According to a report on witchcraft emergent from the Catholic Inquisition:

All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman...What else is a woman but a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic anger, a delectable detriment, an evil nature, painted with fair colours...Women are by nature instruments of Satan – they are by nature carnal, a structural defected rooted in the original creation.²⁰

This document has been branded as a horrific one that served as "the moral backing for a horrible, endless march of suffering, torture and human disgrace inflicted on thousands of women."²¹ This has been better captured by Russian religion scholar Sergei Tokarev who chronicles:

18 Brian P. Levack. *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*. (New York: Routledge 2015), Pg. 129.

19 Steven T. Katz. *The Holocaust in Historical Context: The Holocaust and Mass Death before the Modern Age*. Vol. 1. (New York: Oxford University Press 1994), Pg. 468-9.

20 Steven T. Katz. *The Holocaust in Historical Context: The Holocaust and Mass Death before the Modern Age*. Vol. 1, Pg. 438-9.

21 Nachman Ben-Yehuda. "The European Witch-Craze of the 14th to 17th Centuries: A Sociologist's Perspective." *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 68, No. 1 (1980), Pg. 11.

Medieval demonology, the belief in evil spirits and witches, bloody witch-hunts were, of course, inspired by the Christian clergy, the Catholic and Protestant Inquisition. However the monks and inquisitors who burned thousands of “witches” and supported the belief in man’s communication with evil spirits, relied essentially on ancient, pre-Christian beliefs, and were simply continuing the tradition of bloody human sacrifices.²²

It is therefore clear that such a belief concerning witchcraft has the capacity to make women victims of a holocaust that rests on shoddy foundations and misrepresented understanding of how the world works. Thousands of women were killed in Europe during the Great Witch-hunt and this understanding has diffused into the contemporary African clime thanks to the advent of Pentecostalism. In spite of the rampant beliefs concerning witchcraft, it is important to relay that the meaning of the term is vague if not confusing but underscores feminity necessarily.

Firstly, it needs to be stated that the meaning of witch as an activity that is exclusive of the women is suggestive of gender-bias against women. According to a lexicographer, a witch is “a person, especially a woman, who professes or is supposed to practice magic, especially black magic or black art.”²³ This means that it is only a woman that has the capacity for witchcraft.

The foregoing analysis serves to show among other things, the fact that the translation of ‘*aje*’ as ‘witch’ fails. This is one of the findings of Barry Hallen and John Olubi Sodipo who employed Quine’s *Indeterminacy Thesis* to articulate that word for word translation from one language to another may result in misrepresented ideas. As Hallen puts it, translators: “have

22 Sergei Tokarev. *History of Religion*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1989), Pg. 120.

23 Peter Hanks. *Encyclopedic World Dictionary*. (London: Hamlyn 1976), Pg. 1812.

recourse to contradict because they, perhaps unwittingly, have not been able to arrive at a determinate or precise translation. In effect, then, the translator makes the alien culture responsible for his or her confusion(s) when in fact the real culprit is the translation."²⁴ It is in the light of this exposition that another scholar highlights that:

The English word "witch" does not map well into onto the Yoruba concept of *aje*, unless the original Old Germanic of "one possessing special knowledge or uncommon skill" is intended. Despite their name and unfortunate translation, the *Iya mi* or *aje* are not exclusively female, and one babalawo I interviewed even told me that they are mostly male. In short, *aje* are people of exceptional spiritual power who have the ability to curse or bless those around them, and can be propitiated by certain sacrificial rituals.²⁵

The implication of the foregoing is that the Yoruba word '*aje*' is gender-neutral even if the temptation to patent it as a craft that is exceptionally feminine fails. It is on this premise that this research agrees with Marc Auge that witchcraft is "a set of beliefs, structured and shared by a given population, which addresses the origin of misfortune, illness and death, and the set of practices for detection, treatment and punishment that correspond to these beliefs."²⁶ However, there are attempts to make the gender dichotomy between *aje* (for women) and *oso* (for men) and a critical look into this dichotomy underscores how the traditional Yoruba has a better grasp of these phenomena than the Western counterparts.

24 Barry Hallen. *A Short History of African Philosophy*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2002), Pg. 37-8.

25 Oludamini Ogunnaiké. "Sufism and Ifa: Ways of Knowing in Two West African Intellectual Traditions." (Online Published Ph.D. Dissertation, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, Harvard University 2015), Pg. 251-2.

26 Marc Auge. "Les Croyances a La Sorcellerie." In M. Auge (ed). *La Construction du Monde*. (Paris: F. Maspero 2009), Pg. 53.

Whereas *oso* is readily employed for men who practice that craft which makes a woman a witch, *aje* is gender-neutral and captures *oso* within it. Another important point or factor that needs to be seriously considered is that criminalization of witches both in Yoruba society and Africa is not limited to women alone. This is based upon the firm conviction that only both genders but children are also capable of the craft. Some instances suffice here.

A confession was extracted from a sixteen-year old boy Mamuya in Central Africa. According to his confession:

I've eaten 800 people. I made them have car or plane accidents. I even went to Belgium, thanks to a mermaid who took me all the way to the port of Anvers. Sometimes, I travel on my broomstick, sometimes by flying on an avocado skin. At night, I'm aged 30 and have got 100 children. My father lost his job as an engineer because of me – and then I killed him, with the help of the mermaid. I killed my mother and sister too. I buried them alive. I also killed all the children from my mother.²⁷

What witches do to their victims and how they perceive human parts has also been reported by another twelve-year old boy in the following words:

Everything is useful in the human body. The blood is the fuel, diesel, kerosene and red wine; the water in the body is the motor oil, the brake oil, perfume, drinking water, medicinal syrup and other medicines like ointments to rub on your body. The spine is a radio, a mobile phone, a radio transmitter; the head is a cooking pot, the glass that customers drink from, a swimming pool, a bucket to wash yourself; the eyes are a mirror, a television, a telescope; with

27 V. Beeckman. "Growing on the Streets of Kinshasa." *The Courier ACP-EU*. September-October (2001) Pg. 63-4.

the hair you can make a mattress or a couch for the living room.²⁸

We can see that these reported cases of wickedness as illustrated in the outstanding UNICEF research carried out by Cimpric Aleksandra²⁹ have serious implications for how the phenomenon of witchcraft is conceived in Africa as an art that is not gender exclusive but inclusive. One possible deduction from these confessions is that such are the activities of witches. This research suspends its verdict over this and agrees with the research finding of Hermen Kroesbergen that in Africa, "claiming something to be witchcraft is the default response when no practical explanation is available."³⁰ Hence, the invocations of mystical explanations in responding to reality that are beyond mental and consensual agreements are rife in Africa. It is based on this showing that this study maintains that when mention is made of '*aje*', it does not have to be construed as necessarily evil or malicious. Like *Esu*, *aje* is also a force. Each has the capacity to bestow good life and good luck on adherents and devotees and should not be construed in the Western malicious sense that is mainly malevolent and feminine.

At this juncture, a critic may object on the grounds that the exercise has done no more than romanticize the idea of *aje* among Africans. Unfortunately, this is far from the truth. The contention of this study is to show that the concept *aje* does not map into the Western construction of same. The Western understanding of witchcraft seems to have commanded thousands of innocent women to the gallows out of forced or induced confessions of witchcraft. Much as this does not hold in Africa, it is the case that the belief in the craft as Hermen Kroesbergen correctly observes the default response when no

28 Phillip De Boeck. "Le Deuxieme Monde et Les 'Enfant Sorciers.'" *Politique Africaine*. Vol. 80 (2000), Pg. 47.

29 Cimpric Aleksandra. *Children Accused of Witchcraft: An Anthropological Study of Contemporary Practices in Africa*. (Dakar: UNICEF WCARO, 2010).

30 Hermen Kroesbergen. *The Language of Faith in Southern Africa: Spirit world, Power, Community, Holism*. (Cape Town: AOSIS Ltd 2019), Pg. 47.

practical explanation is available.”³¹ It therefore becomes a burden for the contemporary African scholars and intelligentsia to assist in the explanation of some African phenomena that are quick to graduate into mystical understanding which continues to keep the continent backward intellectually speaking.

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been argued that ‘*aje*’ as a concept is in need of decolonization and the preceding pages were spent in making this point. It is shown that the notion of witchcraft is not clear but gender-biased and motivator for ‘gendercide’ against women in Europe. It is therefore offered that like *Esu*, *aje* may be seen as forces that may be benevolent under proper circumstances in addition to the fact that it is not necessarily a malicious and feminine affair.

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³¹ Hermen Kroesbergen. *The Language of Faith in Southern Africa: Spirit world, Power, Community, Holism*, Pg. 47.

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